2023.009.0146

Sierra Club Questions Nomination of Morton

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SAN FRANCISCO—The Sierra Club Wednesday questioned the qualifications of Rogers C. B. Morton to become secretary of the interior, claiming he has been a close friend of the oil industry in Congress.

The 113,000-member conservation group urged people to write their senators and ask them to take a close look at Morton's record in Senate confirmation hearings late this month.

A decision will be made after the hearings begin on whether the club will flatly oppose confirmation, club President Phillip Berry said. He made clear at a press conference, however, that the club was leaning in that direction.

President Nixon nominated Morton, a former congressman from Maryland and Republican national chairman the last two years, after he fired Walter J. Hickel.

Berry charged that Morton, contrary to reports at the time of his nomination that he is a conservationist, had a record in Congress of "a dismal, lackluster performance" in that field.

"The list of his votes against the environment is a very long one," said Berry. "We believe we should have a man in this job who has shown himself to be a committed and dedicated conservationist. The record of Rogers Morton does not show he is this man.

"Moreover, there is a crying need at this point to appoint someone secretary of interior who can lead the Nixon Administration away from its environmentally destructive policies."

The Sierra Club leader said Morton actively supported the new appropriation for the SST transport plane, backed construction of dams in the Grand Canyon and cosponsored the proposed National Timber Supply Act. All have been successfully opposed so far by the Sierra Club.

Berry said Morton also voted to weaken the 1970 clean air bill, worked to defeat legislation to give strong estuary protection and opposed establishing the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore.

"Morton has spoken for the oil industry in Congress and has resisted recent efforts to shrink its unwarranted tax advantages," Berry said.

"As national chairman for a major political party, he has doubtlessly had to solicit funds from leaders in major industries, such as the oil industry. And, like other past chairmen, he is not likely to be free of encumbering obligations . . . Will he be able to adequately protect the public interest in avoiding another Santa Barbara oil spill or preventing the habitual, willful violations of drilling regulations by oil companies in the Gulf of Mexico?"

Los Angeles Times
A Division of Times Mirror
TIMES MIRROR SQUARE
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90053
Orange County Edition Offices
1375 Sunflower Avenue
Costa Mesa, California

Vol. XC Thurs., Jan. 21, 1971 No. 49

Published daily. Second class postage is paid at Los Angeles, California.
By Carrier: Daily and Sunday $3.50 per month; daily only $3.00 per month; Sunday only $2.00 per month.
By Mail in U.S. and possessions: Daily and Sunday $6.00 per month; daily only $4.25 per month; Sunday only $2.75 per month.
By Mail in foreign countries: Daily and Sunday $8.50 per month; daily only $6.50 per month; Sunday only $4.00 per month.